

Bibliographer and collector *the legacy of Sir John Ferguson*

D.W.A. Baker profiles the figure behind the Ferguson Collection

Sir John Ferguson: the name immediately brings to mind Ferguson's *Bibliography of Australia*, one of the great triumphs of Australian scholarship. Less well known, but perhaps almost equally important, was Ferguson the collector, because his vast collection of books, pamphlets, maps, pictures and manuscripts provides some of the National Library's great strength as a specialist research institution.

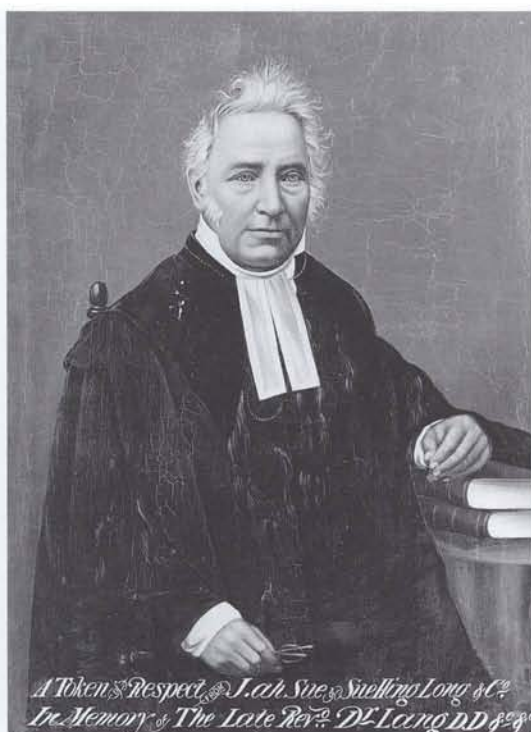
In his *Bibliography of Australia* Ferguson set out to record and

accurately describe every book and pamphlet concerning Australia from 1784 to 1900, wherever it had been published. The first volume appeared in 1941; the seventh and last was published in 1969, shortly after his death. In all the *Bibliography* has over 19 000 entries. I suppose it has some errors, though after many years of using it I have personally never found one. It certainly has omissions, but these are so rare that if an antiquarian bookseller has an item Ferguson overlooked he will advertise it in big letters as 'NOT IN FERGUSON' and bump up the price accordingly.

By profession Ferguson was a lawyer, first a barrister and later a judge with chambers in Sydney. Each

Sir John Ferguson
after a colour photograph by Keast Burke
Form the Pictorial Collection

lunch hour he would put on his bowler hat, being always a very respectably dressed man, and pick up two sandwiches. He would eat one as he walked along Macquarie Street to the Mitchell Library. Here he would work for three quarters of an hour or so and then walk back to his chambers while eating his second sandwich. So the work was done. (The way in which Ferguson cooperated with the Mitchell Library and other libraries around Australia in this endeavour has been well



Portrait of John Dunmore Lang 1888

oil on canvas; 90.4 x 66.4 cm

From the Pictorial Collection

Ferguson served as honorary librarian to St Stephen's Presbyterian Church in Margaret Street, Sydney, and possessed an extensive collection of Lang's letters

described by Diana Giese in the *National Library of Australia News* vol. II, no 1, October 1991.)

Ferguson's interest in collecting Australiana was no doubt fostered by his marriage in 1907 to Bessie, the daughter of George Robertson, one of Sydney's best known booksellers and publishers. His collection grew apace so that he repeatedly had to move house to provide more room for his books—from Greenwich to Hunter's Hill to Roseville. Here the books were shelved in his home and in a brick garage and arranged in the same order as they were listed in his *Bibliography*.

Ferguson was a strong Australian patriot with an old fashioned loyalty to the monarchy. Just inside the front door of his Roseville home, facing all who entered, was a coloured life-sized photograph of the Queen. It was a vivid expression of his views. Sometimes, though, there was a certain tension between this loyalty and his deep concern for what was decent and proper. Sir John was greatly distressed, for instance, when the Duke of Edinburgh was on one occasion reported as having used the epithet

'bloody'. It was not seemly, he thought, that a member of the royal family should use such language in public.

Ferguson's father was a Presbyterian minister and Sir John himself lived as a staunch Presbyterian; for years he was an elder at St Stephen's in Sydney. He also for many years served as honorary librarian of the Presbyterian Church Library in Margaret Street. Here he would preside every Tuesday morning, sitting at the head of a large dining room table that had belonged to the Reverend Doctor John Dunmore Lang (1799–1878), the first Presbyterian minister to settle in Sydney. He encouraged scholars to use the library, which possessed not only many books but also a considerable collection of manuscripts relating to the history of the several bodies which made up the nineteenth-century Presbyterian Church of New South Wales. Ferguson's detailed knowledge of the sources was of great assistance to all those interested in the Church's history.

Halfway through the morning, all work would stop for 20 minutes or so while morning tea was drunk and Sir John, with good humour, a quiet wit and immense knowledge, led a discussion of matters of interest of the day.

Ferguson's generosity and trust were unbounded. In the early 1960s,

when I often worked in the Margaret Street library, I was doing research for a biography of Dr Lang. Years earlier Ferguson had purchased several hundred letters written to Lang in the 1840s by people in Great Britain who had hoped to migrate to Australia. One day he brought these letters into the library wrapped up in three brown paper parcels. To my astonishment he did not expect me to read them in the library, but told me to take them home, read them at my leisure and return them when I had finished. There was no question of making an inventory or signing a receipt. He just handed over these three brown paper parcels.

The letters were in no order whatsoever, so I offered to arrange them chronologically as I worked. Sir John approved of this suggestion, so I spent a little time not only reading the letters but also arranging them. This collection of letters came to the National Library after Ferguson's death. They show very vividly the sort of people Lang sent to Australia in six shiploads in 1848 and 1849. In a word, these people were petit bourgeois, shopkeepers, tradespersons, small landowners—neither very rich nor very poor, precisely the social class from which Lang's own family came.

Ferguson was also closely associated with the Public Library of New South Wales. He was a trustee of that library from 1935, and its president from 1963 to 1967. He remained on its governing body till his death in 1969. It might have been expected, therefore, that his great collection of books and manuscripts would go to the Mitchell Library. He decided, however, that as the Mitchell Library already possessed the greater part of his published collection, it should go instead to the National Library in Canberra which, because of its later foundation, had not had the opportunity of acquiring so much nineteenth-century material.

Sir John had decided views about book collecting. Many people who purchased books were not, in his view, true collectors. A doctor or lawyer who acquired a professional library was not a book collector; nor was a writer who purchased books to



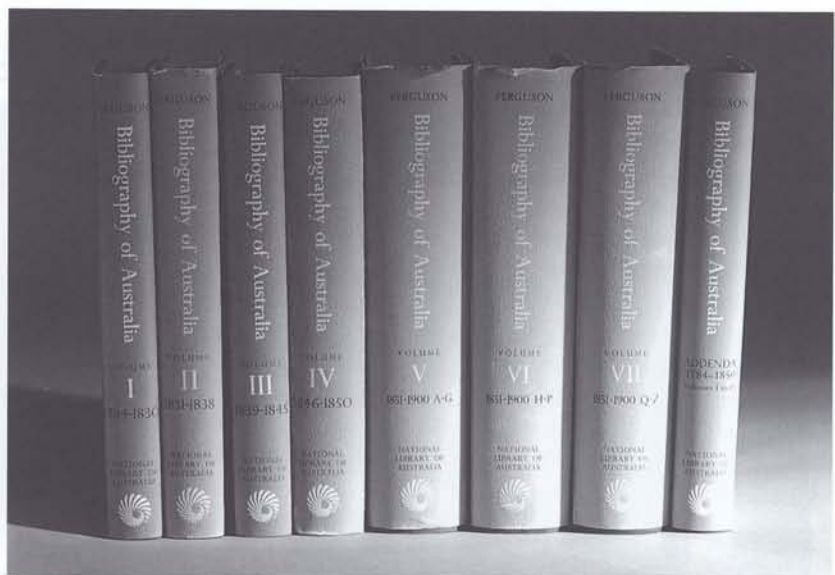
Ferguson bookplate. This one is from the inside cover of Lawson's short story collection *While the Billy Boils* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1896) From the Ferguson Collection

Ferguson's masterwork, *Bibliography of Australia* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1975–86)

use in writing his own work. No-one who made miscellaneous and desultory purchases of books, as a magpie picks up bits and pieces, could be thought of as a book collector. And certainly no-one who bought books in the hope of selling them again at a profit was a book collector; he was simply a speculator or investor in books.

The true collector, Ferguson believed, is one who has a reverence for books and a desire to possess the original, or the curious, or the interesting edition of a book he or she loves or respects.

As time goes by, older books become rarer and more expensive, so collecting them becomes more difficult. But this, Ferguson thought, should not deter the true collector: 'the scarcer the fish,' he said, 'the more knowledgeable, enterprising and active must the angler become'. The true collector of Australiana must therefore possess a good background knowledge of Australian history, and be familiar with Australian literature, art, printing, biography and bibliography; they must read extensively both old and modern



books, and make friends of all the booksellers in their neighbourhood.

In the preface of volume III of his *Bibliography*, which deals with the period from 1839 to 1845, Ferguson remarks on the large number of 'ghost' books of that time—that is, books to which a reference has been made in some other publication (for example reviews or advertisements in the press), but which cannot be found in any library or private collection. In the past, book collectors have preserved many books from becoming ghosts and though this is much less likely to happen now, it does not mean that book collecting has lost its purpose. Ferguson emphasised the importance of what he termed 'cabinet collectors'—those who specialise in some subject and strive for completeness in some limited field. As he stated:

to collect upon a plan in a limited field of Australiana is to invest the pursuit with both dignity and usefulness. The collector becomes master of his subject; his collection may not occupy much space but will be well housed and the books will be in as fine condition as possible. The collector will be wise if he follows his own interests and does not attempt to throw his net too wide.

Fortunately for readers in the National Library, however, Ferguson did not actually follow his own sensible advice, but collected in all fields of Australiana. He used agents in London, as well as purchasing from Australian booksellers. He collected

not only published books but also manuscripts, maps and pictures, so that his collection became exceedingly rich and diverse. It is especially strong in Presbyterian and Wesleyan records and has a substantial number of manuscripts relating to John Dunmore Lang.

Among the maps which Ferguson collected there are many showing town allotments and plans of land sales. These are a rich source for social history as they often have illustrations of contemporary landscapes or show the architecture of dwellings and other buildings of the time. On many occasions he rescued a work, or an edition of a work, from becoming a ghost. In the first volume of his *Bibliography* alone, there are no fewer than 38 items, copies of which are attributed solely to the Ferguson Collection. Perhaps the most extraordinary of these works which Ferguson saved from 'ghostliness' is the *Compendio dei Viaggi Moderni* by G.B. Eyries, published in 43 volumes in Venice in 1830 (Ferguson 1347).

In all, there are 34 000 items in his collection, making it easily the largest in the Library. (By comparison the famous Petherick Collection, commemorated by the Petherick Reading Room, has fewer than half that number of items.) Ferguson was truly a great benefactor, both as bibliographer and as collector.

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